



William Hoare, Fromm Winery

Generation Y-ine

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Not many youngsters decide on their career choice at the tender age of nine. However one of the new generation winemakers in Marlborough did just that. William Hoare even has the auspicious title of being one of the youngest winemakers ever in the region, producing his first vintage before he was 10.

Not that he would say it was a great success. In fact if you were to ask his parents, they would probably say his early foray into the world of wine was a major disaster, particularly for the laundry in their relatively new home.

In reality, William has never known anything other than wine, after his parents moved to Marlborough when he was three, to buy a bare patch of land to develop in Rapaura. He may have missed out on the hard yards of planting the original vines, but he certainly had to make up for it in later years. As he grew, so too did the vineyard and he had his fair share of planting out vines, bud rubbing and wire lifting. When phylloxera hit in the early 90s, he was old enough to assist in the major replanting.

Growers for Cloudy Bay, his parents encouraged William to spend some time with the winemaker Kevin Judd.

"They were really cool, they even took me out of school for a week and said 'Go follow Kev around at the winery.'"

This was when William was nine!

Having helped pick some of the family grapes, he was given the task of making a wine from start to finish.

"We put the fruit in a bin, jumped on it

and drained off all the juice, then put some yeast in it, got it fermenting and bottled it after about a month or so."

The bottles were taken home, placed in the nice, newly painted white laundry where it was relatively warm, and left to age. Unfortunately, some residual sugar combined with warm conditions allowed secondary fermentation to begin and before the Hoare family knew what was happening, they had a mini war zone going on in the laundry. Instead of blood, it was pink coloured Rosé that exploded all over the walls. Not the most auspicious start.

"That was my first experience of learning about secondary fermentation."

It didn't put him off though; instead it cemented his belief that winemaking was what he wanted to do when he grew up. He focused on sciences while at school, with the end goal always in sight. Despite the obvious need to have a rudimentary science background, William believes now he should have spent more time learning languages, given where his career has taken him.

"Obviously you need the theory, because you need to know what is happening and why it is happening. But the actual process isn't that complicated. You are only doing maybe six or seven things in a winery lab and they are the same things every time. You don't have to re-invent the wheel, so once you have learnt the process, you know all you need to know. Whereas if you are doing a lot of different vintages all over the world, the need to

have knowledge of foreign languages is really important. If you are working in say Burgundy, it gives you a lot of kudos as a winemaker. But unless you can ask those intricate little questions about the whys and wherefores, you are basically just doing a harvest. You need to be able to ask the questions and also understand the answers – so language is quite important."

Having tasted life in the cellar at Cloudy Bay at such an early stage in life, William was keen to head straight back there once school had finished. However the production manager Alan Stanbury had different ideas.

"He said to me, if you want to work in the cellar, you have to work on the bottling line for a year."

I suggest that maybe he knew about his earlier experiences with Rosé, and was trying to save the Cloudy Bay cellar from a similar experience.

"I ended up making boxes for an entire year. Somehow I don't think he thought I was going to last. But after a year they let me into the cellar."

While learning the practical side of the industry, William was also undertaking a correspondence course via EIT in Hawkes Bay. But winemaker James Healy believed he should be doing even more than that.

"He said to me there are two forms of winemaking. New World and Old World. You need to learn Old World. James had recently been to the States to a winery called Au Bon Climat or ABC, where

they were making some amazing Pinot Noirs. He liked what they were doing and helped get me a position working over there.”

The winery was based in Santa Maria, which William was to discover, has a very similar climate to that of Marlborough. They have this seashore breeze coming in, the days are around 25 – 28 degrees and the nights get quite cool. It was quite strange how similar it was to Marlborough.

You would swear they had taken the Wither Hills and plonked them down in the background to the winery.” Having studied and worked in France, the winemakers had an intricate knowledge of the world of Burgundian style wines, which William was able to lap up. For the next few years, he would split his year between the Au Bon Climat winery and Cloudy Bay, travelling back and forth.

“It was a relatively small winery, focused on Pinot

Noir. But inside the major winery building there was also another separate wine company called Qupé. They focused on Syrah. That’s where I became interested in that variety. Up until then, I had had no experience of it.”

He didn’t confine his travelling to just the States and Marlborough. After a while he realised he could gain more experience by following vintages around the world. At one stage he was doing four a year, starting in South Africa, moving to Marlborough, then to the States and onto Europe. It all added to his knowledge base.

“The cool thing is you can see what

works and more importantly things that don’t work. If say the winery is doing trials, and you get involved, it’s all care and no responsibility in some ways, so you learn some pretty amazing stuff. Like the guys in the States used to re-use the lees. They would tip it back into the Chardonnay tanks if the wine was showing signs of oxidation. They have been doing that in France for years, but



William stomping the grapes, aged 9.

you never get to see how it works unless you experience it.”

The differences between the four countries, when it comes to the wine industry, were spread. In South Africa for example, William says there was a dearth of knowledge, given the country had been cut off from the rest of the world for decades.

“They were really interested in new technology and the winemaking was very technology focused rather than site focused. Whereas in the old world, it is far more about the vineyards. The actual winemaking is similar; everyone tends to do basically the same thing. No matter

where in the world you are the process of making wine doesn’t change a huge amount. Instead it’s about understanding the sites and soils – that is the big difference.”

He admits that has a lot to do with the fact vineyards and wineries in Europe in particular have been in the same family’s hands for generations. They have an intricate knowledge of their vineyards and

what flavours come from their specific soils. While Marlborough is still a baby in terms of age as a wine producing region, he says the same thing is starting to happen here.

“There used to be this mindset that Marlborough was just one big vineyard. But now it’s like the four rows to the left hand corner always get a little bit stressed, so they have to be picked earlier. The thinking has changed. People are beginning to recognise that there are little pockets within the

larger picture.”

It was while he was working four vintages a year, that the opportunity came up to work for Fromm. Having met Hätsch, he got the opportunity to work in Switzerland at the Fromm base.

“In a way I was quite lucky, because Georg (Fromm) had hurt his back, so he couldn’t do much. I got to do pretty much everything in the cellar. It ended up being around the same time that the German cellarhand here at Fromm Marlborough was thinking of moving on. Georg asked me if I wanted to take his place. I’ve been here ever since.”

His knowledge of old world winemaking

techniques certainly helped in his advancement and the major bonus for William, was the variety of wines Fromm was making. With a passion for Pinot Noir and Syrah, the opportunity was too good to pass up.

"It's funny looking back. Georg talks about people (who are now quite big Pinot producers), who used to pull him aside quietly and say to him that he shouldn't plant Pinot in Marlborough, because of the climate. He used to say to them, 'If I can grow it in Switzerland and make some pretty amazing wines, then I think I can make some incredible Pinots in Marlborough.' I think there was a mind set back in the 90s that you had to plant all varieties with three metre row spacings and grow it like Sauvignon Blanc.

Whereas Georg used European close planting. People thought he was nuts – in fact I remember thinking that myself in the beginning."

When establishing his new vineyard, Georg also chose to plant Syrah, again something the locals couldn't quite get their head around. Syrah was planted in Marlborough by Vavasour and Cloudy Bay in the early days, but back then it wasn't a fashionable wine and the vines were all later removed. Fromm's Syrah vines are nearing 20 years of age, and they are producing some stunning wines, something William is revelling in.

"Our single vineyards are getting close to between 15 and 19 years of age and now they don't have to be irrigated. Some haven't had a drop of water for two years. So what happens is they have to suck up the water from the soil and that's where the flavours come from, giving a sense of place (terroir). It's what makes them so unique and special, no one can copy them."

Syrah will always hold a special place in

his heart, when it comes to winemaking favourites, particularly as he learns more about the variety.

"It has become pretty trendy lately so we are learning a huge amount about it. I went to the Rhone recently and met with some winemakers who are doing some amazing stuff. They have some pretty old vines to work with admittedly, but that is what is so exciting for us. Our vines are probably the oldest in Marlborough which gives us such an advantage. Yes, so at the moment Syrah would be my favourite wine to make. But in the overall picture, I would probably say my real favourite would be Pinot Noir. You can make some amazing Pinots; there are so many aspects to it as a variety, so much input. But my favourite wine to drink would have to be chardonnay"

Now settled and married in Marlborough, William isn't the least bit pessimistic about the future of the region.

"I am very positive about Marlborough. Yes there are a lot of negative things happening out there at the moment. But we all knew it would happen at some stage, it's just that it has happened a lot faster than anyone thought.

"But if you look at the exports going out of Marlborough and you look at the plantings, there is only so much wine that can be made. At the moment there is a discrepancy between sales and production, but they should both line up by 2012 or 2013. I think it will find balance again.

"I imagine the grape price will settle around the \$1800 a tonne mark for Sauvignon because that is where everyone makes money."

He admits that in the meantime there will be some pretty tough times for people and some will inevitably be burnt.

"But that won't last. That is why I am so

positive about Marlborough. There will be some tough times and people will get out. But then people will start to want to be different and you will start to see different sites and single vineyards being developed. Places like the Southern Valleys will become a region, Renwick will become another and people will start to distinguish themselves by where they are. That's what has happened all over the world, site focusing. That will become really important here too."

"When I first came here, Fromm was doing about 60 or 70 tonnes, and we still do the same amount. I couldn't understand why we didn't grow, because the demand for the wine was certainly there. But Georg had an interesting way of thinking. He said; 'If we continued to stay small and kept our price points the winery could support four families.' He didn't ever want to get to the size where you had to continually grow to survive and then eventually lose control. And he was right. In tough times like today the same people that were ordering the single vineyard wines fifteen years ago continue to today, regardless of pricing, as the wines are made in small volumes and are still in demand. "

While his early career was marked by the number of vintages he managed to fit into a 12 month period, William says he doesn't miss the constant hands on experience. These days he gets more enjoyment out of visiting wineries and talking shop with his peers.

"You can pick up a lot of interesting stuff by spending half a day with someone. I really love that."

And any regrets about career choice?

"Hell no!" ☹